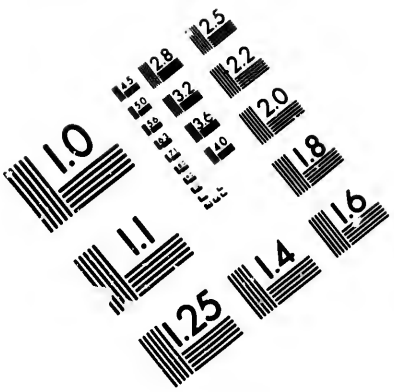

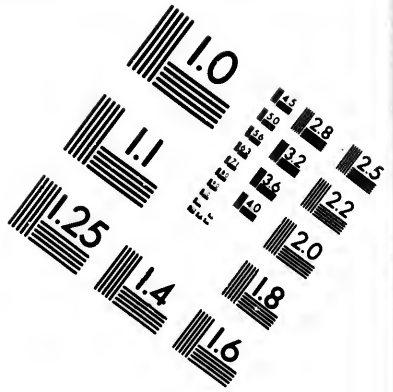

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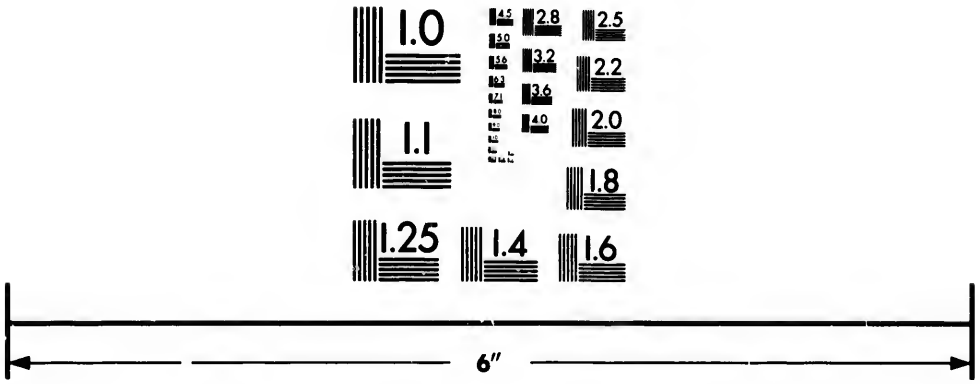

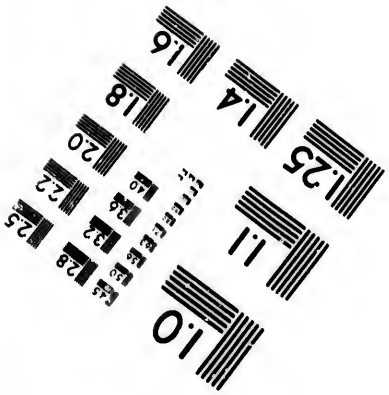

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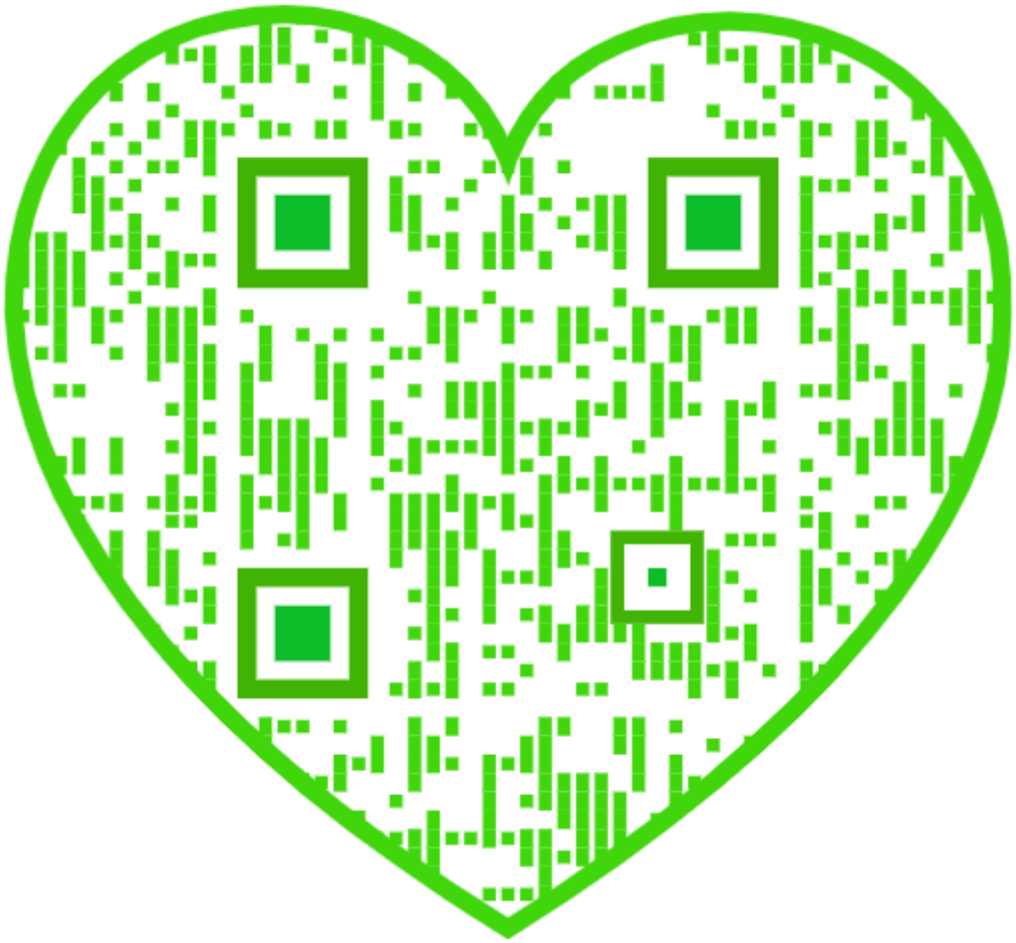

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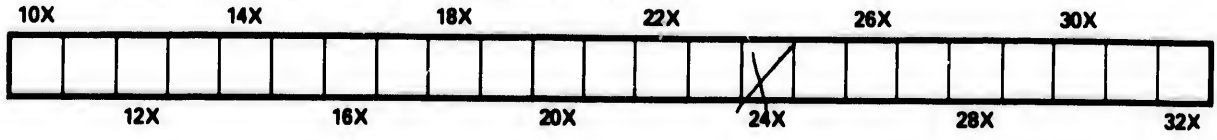

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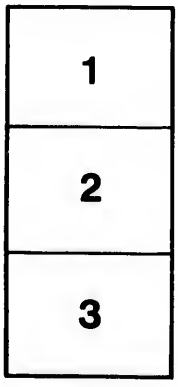

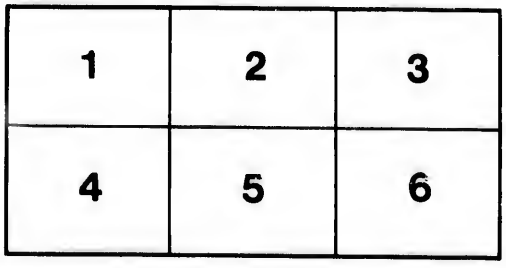

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No. 6.—A Few Notes on Canadian Plant-Lore.

BY

CARRIE M. DERICK, M.A.

[Reprinted from the Canadian Record of Science, Vol. vii., No. 4.]

MONTREAL, 1897.

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"Reprinted from the Canadian Record of Science, Vol. VII., No. 4."

A Few Notes on Canadian Plant-Lore.

By Carrie M. Derick, M.A., McGill University.

In that part of the Province of Quebec known as the Eastern Townships, are to be still found lingering superstitions and quaint ideas, which reveal the story of the past. Clarenceville, which lies between Missisquoi Bay and the Richelieu River, is peopled by the descendants of Dutch United Empire Loyalists. Owing, however, to intermarriage with other nationalities, many of the traits of the Dutch ancestors have been lost, and the current folk-lore can frequently be traced to English, Irish, and Scotch sources. Coming, as they did, more than one hundred years ago to hew out a new home in the heart of the primeval forest, they lived close enough to nature to lay up a rich store of weird fancies and strange legends for the delight of their children's children. But the struggle for existence was too keen and the people too closely occupied with the sternly practical side of life to weave new stories of the mysterious world around them, and even the old were forgotten. Moreover, the effects of the late war were so deeply impressed upon their hearts that the reminiscences of old age were of the intense realities of the immediate past rather than of the superstitions about field and wood. It is not surprising, therefore, that the plant-lore of the community is largely medicinal.

The doctrine of signatures, which supposed that plants by their external characters indicated the diseases for which nature intended them as remedies, has been superseded by a scientific knowledge of the true medicinal properties of plants. Nevertheless, many can recall some old woman whose famous cures were effected by means of herbs, and whose garret was redolent with the peculiar odors of dried pennyroyal, mint, and tansy.

Among the time-honoured medicinal plants, are many

still considered most useful in home pharmacy. Celandine (*Chelidonium majus*) is much valued as the basis of an ointment used in various malignant diseases of the skin, and it is said to be a permanent cure for scrofula. The plant was held in high esteem in ancient times and was very popular as an eye remedy. Culpepper says the plant is called celandine from χελιδών, the swallow, because "if you put out the eyes of young swallows, when they are in the nest, the old ones will recover their eyes again with this herb."[1] But Gerarde assures us such "things are vain and false; for Cornelius Celses, lib. 6, witnesseth, That when the sight of the eies of divers birds is put forth by some outward means, it will after a time be restored of it selfe, and soonest of all the sight of the swallow; whereupon (as the same author saith) the tale grew, how thorow an herb the dams restore that thing which healeth of it selfe."[2]

In Clarenceville, a salve made from the leaves of the chamomile (*Anthemis nobilis*) is frequently used, though it is not, as in the past, considered "a remedie against all wearisomnesse."[3] In the Townships, it is said that few people can grow the plant, for "while some can handle it, as soon as others touch it, it dies." This view is directly opposed to the old English proverb,

> "Like a camomile bed,
> The more it is trodden,
> The more it will spread."[4]

Several species of Aralia are in great repute and probably do possess remedial properties. They are sought not only by the Canadian "simpler," but sarsaparilla is the chief ingredient of a popular patent medicine. Ginseng (*Aralia quinquefolia*), whose roots bear a supposed resemblance to the human body, was highly esteemed

[1] Culpepper's "Complete Herbal and English Physician enlarged."
[2, 3] "The Herball or General Historie of Plants," by John Gerarde.
[4] Dyer's Folk-Lore of Plants.

by the Chinese and Japanese and by North American Indians. Père Lafitau discovered the plant in Canada in 1716[1], and the greatest excitement ensued on account of the high price the plant commanded in the market. M. Garneau says: "Le ginseng que les Chinois tiraint à grand frais du nord de l'Asie, fut porté des bords du St. Laurent à Canton. Il fut trouvé excellent et vendu très cher; de sorte que bientôt une livre, qui ne valait à Québec que *deux francs*, y monta jusqu'à *vingt-cinq francs*. Il en fut exporté, une année pour 500,000 francs. Le haut prix que cette racine avait atteint, excita une aveugle cupidité. On la cueillit au mois de mai au lieu du mois de septembre, et on la fit sècher au four au lieu de la faire sècher lentement et à l'ombre: elle ne valuit plus rien aux yeux de Chinois, qui cessèrent d'en acheter. Ainsi, un commerce qui promettait de devenir une source de richesse, tomba et s'éteignit complètement en peu d'années."[2] As a blood-purifier, ginseng has ever been a popular home medicine, and of late it has again become a readily marketable commodity. Another member of the family, spikenard (*Aralia racemosa*), is used for poultices and as a salve in skin diseases.

The Compositae furnish several famous remedies. Southernwood (*Artemisia abrotinum*), as in the time of Galen and Dioscorides, is thought good for inflammation of the eyes.[3] And the greatest of panaceas for all the ills of man and beast, according to the simpler, is wormwood (*Artemesia absinthium*).[4] From early times it has been held in deep veneration as a cure for inflammation, sprains, wounds, and all "ill-humours and weaknesses." Wormwood is a favorite disinfectant also. An old rhyme by Tusser asks:

1 Mémoire à La Duc d'Orleans, concernant la Precieuse Plante du Ginseng de Tartarie Découverte en Amérique par le Père Joseph-François Lafitau de la Compagnie de Jesus.

2 L'Histoire du Canada, par F.-X. Garneau.

3, 4, Gerarde's "Herball."

" What savour is better, if physicke be true,
For places infected, than wormwood and rue?"[1]

The root of elecampane (*Inula helenium*) " taken with hony or sugar made in an electuary . . . prevaileth mightily against the cough,"[2] and a candy made from it and molasses is most popular with the victims of whooping-cough, whether from the healing properties or soothing qualities of the sweet, it would be difficult to say.

The dyspeptic natures of the Clarenceville people demand varied treatment, and boneset tea (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*), " dandelion bitters" (*Taraxacum dens-leonis*), and tansy tea (*Tanecetum vulgare*) are mentioned in respectful tones by older people who measure the efficacy of a medicine by its unpleasantness. Dandelions are favourite "greens," and Culpepper, who is fond of preaching a sermon, says of the herb " the French and Dutch do eat it in the spring," showing, he adds, that " foreign physicians are not so selfish as ours, but more communicative of the virtues of plants to people."[3]

Rheumatism is a disease of which the so-called cures are as varied as the victims. The favourite remedy is to carry in the pocket a potato, which in some mysterious way absorbs the disease. A piece of flax bound round the afflicted member, or applications of smartweed (*Polygonum hydropiper*) are also commonly used.

Saffron (*Crocus sativus*) is a Clarenceville cure for measles, but it is not a local remedy. Gerarde says, " the eyes being anointed with the same dissolved in milke or fennel or rose water are preserved from being hurt by small-pox or measles."[4] The use of saffron in cases of jaundice is probably due to the bright yellow color of the flower, of which Dioscorides said " it maketh a man well-coloured."[5]

1 " The Folk-Lore of Plants" by T. F. Thistleton Dyer.
2, 4, 5, Gerarde's " Herball."
3 Culpepper's Complete Herbal.

Throat and lung troubles are very prevalent in the Eastern Townships, and many old remedies for coughs are still used. Elecampane has been already noticed, hemlock (*Tsuga Canadensis*) is steeped and taken for ordinary colds, and a decoction of horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*) is esteemed by consumptives. More popular than any other, however, is the Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*), once called the witches' taper. It is interesting to note that in New England the mullein is made into a poultice for tooth-ache. Gold-thread (*Coptis trifolia*), or "goold-thread" as it is often called, is used for the cure of sore throats. "Smellage" or smallage (*Apium gravcolens*) is considered an excellent purifier of the blood. The plantain (*Plantago major*) is used for the healing of wounds, and the application of a dock-leaf to the sting of a nettle is as well known as the old English adage—

> "Nettle out, dock in—
> Dock remove the nettle sting."[1]

Applications of the dried and pulverized root of "yellow-dock" (*Rumex britannica*) or of galium will at once, it is believed, stop the bleeding of a wound.

Although, in New England, plants with milky juice are supposed to cause warts, in Clarenceville, the juice of the milkweed (*Asclepias cornuti*) is considered an infallible cure for them.

Hops will allay pain and induce sleep. An ear-ache may be cured by an onion poultice. The ash, which in many places is considered a protection against serpents,[2] and with which a charm seems to have been always connected, is another cure for an ear-ache. A piece of root is cut, one end is charred in the fire, the sap oozing from the other end is caught and dropped into the ear, whereupon the pain ceases. Catnip, catnep, or catmint (*Nepeta cataria*), so-called because cats love its odour and

1 Dyer's Folk-Lore of Plants.
2 Fiske's Myths and Myth-Makers.

roll and tumble in it, has since the time of Gerarde been steeped and taken to relieve pains of all kinds.

In the past, it was not so much the inherent remedial properties of plants which brought them into repute as supposed magical virtues or some peculiar method of applying the remedy. This superstitious feeling still exists, and a striking instance was afforded, in Clarenceville, by an old man, who cured wounds and sores, especially of animals, by means of "the sticks." Up to the time of his death, four years ago, he was in great demand in cases which had defied the skill of a veterinary surgeon, and even those who were ashamed of their belief said he effected wonderful cures. His great age, pompous manner, absolute faith in himself, and his supposed wisdom, derived from some Indians over whom he had been captain, combined to make the application of the sticks an impressive ceremony. A charm or formula, which was kept a profound secret, was used. So far as is known, the cure was wrought as follows:—three slender twigs, about four inches long, were cut from a sweet-apple tree, and sharpened at both ends. Having been inserted in the wound for a few minutes, they were removed, wrapped in paper, and carefully tied up. As it was most important that they should be kept warm, the operator carried them in an inner pocket during the day and placed them under his pillow at night. These precautions having been taken, the most dangerous wound invariably healed rapidly. The use of the number three and of the sweet-apple tree, which has in many places and at all times had mystic virtues ascribed to it, perhaps indicate that this curious local custom had its origin in an ancient practice.

The live-for-ever (*Sedum telephium*), which in Westphalia is used as a charm against lightning, and which serves as a love charm[1] in some parts of England, was formerly used by the Germans and the English as a cure

[1] "The Folk-Lore of Plants" by Dyer.

for various diseases. It is, however, in ill-repute in Clarenceville. Few will allow even a sprig of it in their houses, believing that its tenacity of life is due to a power of feeding upon the very existence of human beings, and that it keeps fresh and green at their expense.

Although the old superstitions have lost their power, some have a lingering belief in the possibility of finding water by means of a witch-hazel twig, and in the protection from lightning, which is afforded by a beech-tree, and many more own to a decidedly uncomfortable feeling if an apple-tree blossom in the fall. This is due to a belief common in New England and embodied in an old Northamptonshire proverb—

> "A bloom upon the apple-tree, when the apples are ripe,
> Is a sure termination to somebody's life."

The idea of any unseasonable event or dream being a token of ill-luck is voiced in a saying "to dream of fruit out of season is to sorrow out of reason." This is a wrongly quoted and misapplied English rhyme,[1] which is an example of the many changes which plant-lore undergoes in its travels from one country to another. A curious instance of differences in word and thought is furnished by a Clarenceville and New England dictum, "An apple in the morning is golden, at noon it is silver, but at night it is lead." While a Devonshire rhyme says:

> "Eat an apple going to bed,
> Make the doctor beg his bread."[2]

Little can be added to the plant names, weather-lore, love-charms, and children's games, mentioned by the writer in a former paper.[3] The compass plants of different countries vary greatly, and a bit of local woodcraft is the belief that the topmost branch of a pine or hemlock always points to the north. The weather-wise say that "the turning up of leaves so as to show the lighter under side is a sure sign of rain." This appearance, which is

1, 2. "The Folk-Lore of Plants" by Dyer.
3 Canadian Record of Science, April, 1893.

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an adaptation to reduced transpiration, is really due to the curling of a leaf in times of drought, so as to present the edge to the rays of the sun. Several curious expressions are common. A man, from fear or ague, may "shake like a popple-leaf," a calm person is "as cool as a cucumber," and a wealthy man is "worth a plum," while a valueless object or person "is not worth shucks." As in New England,[1] "shucks" for nut-shells, the "tossell and silk" of the corn and "corn-cob" are common terms.

In regard to plant names, there is a lack of interesting matter. Little discrimination is shown, and, to the majority, all small, pale, spring-flowers are "mayflowers." Popular English plant names are sometimes misapplied, for instance, the marsh-marigold (*Caltha palustris*) is called "the cowslip," periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) is known as "myrtle," and the jewel-weed (*Impatiens fulva*) is often styled "smart-weed." Another popular name for the jewel-weed, "touch-me-not," referring to the sudden bursting of the pods when touched, may account for a curious idea that the plant is poisonous to the touch and will cause blindness.

A favourite amusement, transplanted from England, is to pluck the rays of a daisy one by one, at the same time repeating the formula, "Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief." The term used with the last ray indicates the status of the future spouse of the experimenter. As elsewhere, four-leaved clovers exercise their magic spell, dandelion curls and whistling grasses rejoice the hearts of successive generations of boys and girls, and practical jokes owing to the confusion of lady's thumb knotweed (*Polygonum persicaria*) and the smartweed (*P. hydropipex*) have a perennial freshness. Thus the fancies and games of childhood prolong the fading romance of the past, and furnish connecting links which prove the whole world kin.

[1] The Century Magazine, April, 1894.

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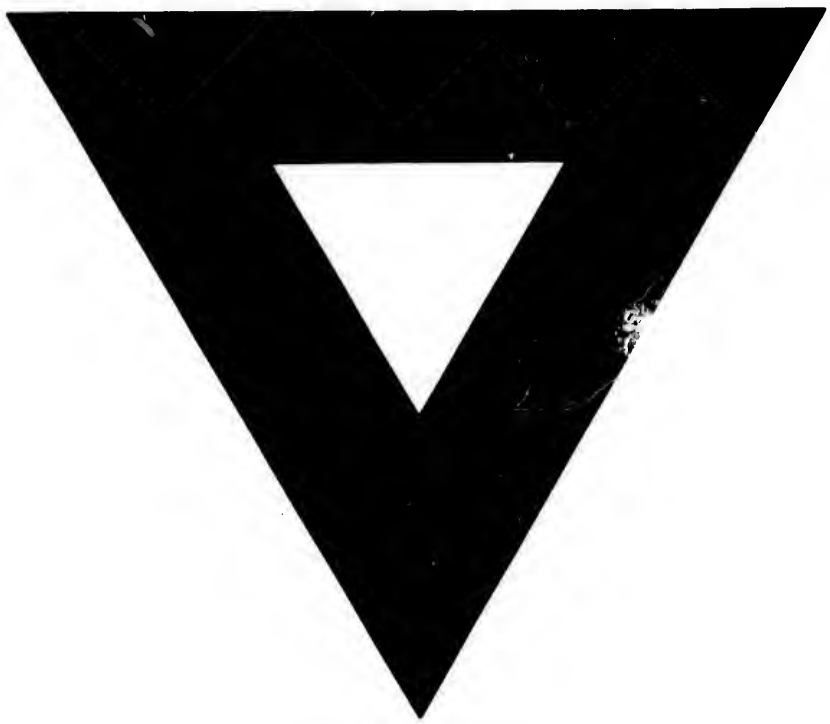
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